

ESKIMO LIFE



CHAPTER I

GREENLAND AND THE ESKIMO

GREENLAND is in a peculiar manner associated with Norway and with the Norwegians. Our forefathers were the first Europeans who found their way to its shores. In their open vessels the old Vikings made their daring voyages, through tempests and drift-ice, to this distant land of snows, settled there throughout several centuries, and added it to the domain of the Norwegian crown.

After the memory of its existence had practically passed away, it was again one of our countrymen¹ who, on behalf of a Norwegian company, founded the second European settlement of the country.

It is poor, this land of the Eskimo, which we have taken from him; it has neither timber nor gold to offer us—it is naked, lonely, like no other land

¹ Hans Egede. *Trans.*

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inhabited of man. But in all its naked poverty, how beautiful it is! If Norway is glorious, Greenland is in truth no less so. When one has once seen it, how dear to him is its recollection! I do not know if others feel as I do, but for me it is touched with all the dream-like beauty of the fairyland of my childish imagination. It seems as though I there found our own Norwegian scenery repeated in still nobler, purer forms.

It is strong and wild, this Nature, like a saga of antiquity carven in ice and stone, yet with moods of lyric delicacy and refinement. It is like cold steel with the shimmering colours of a sunlit cloud playing through it.

When I see glaciers and ice-mountains, my thoughts fly to Greenland where the glaciers are vaster than anywhere else, where the ice-mountains jut into a sea covered with icebergs and drift-ice. When I hear loud encomiums on the progress of our society, its great men and their great deeds, my thoughts revert to the boundless snow-fields stretching white and serene in an unbroken sweep from sea to sea, high over what have once been fruitful valleys and mountains. Some day, perhaps, a similar snow-field will cover us all.

Everything in Greenland is simple and great—white snow, blue ice, naked, black rocks and peaks,

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'THE BOUNDLESS SNOW-FIELDS STRETCHING CALM AND WHITE FROM SEA TO SEA'

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and dark stormy sea. When I see the sun sink glowing into the waves, it recalls to me the Greenland sunsets, with the islets and rocks floating, as it were, on the burnished surface of the smooth, softly-heaving sea, while inland the peaks rise row on row, flushing in the evening light. And sometimes when I see the sæter-life¹ at home and watch the sæter-girls and the grazing cows, I think of the tent-life and the reindeer-herds on the Greenland fiords and uplands; I think of the screaming ptarmigan, the moors and willow-copses, the lakes and valleys in among the mountains where the Eskimo lives through his brief summer.

But like nothing else is the Greenland winter-night with its flaming northern lights; it is Nature's own mystic spirit-dance.

Strange is the power which this land exercises over the mind; but the race that inhabits it is not less remarkable than the land itself.

The Eskimo, more than anyone else, belongs to the coast and the sea. He dwells by the sea, upon it he seeks his subsistence, it gives him all the necessaries of his life, over it he makes all his journeys, whether in his skin-canoes in summer, or in his dog-sledges when it is ice-bound in winter. The sea is thus the strongest influence in the life of

¹ Sæter = mountain chalet. *Trans.*

the Eskimo; what wonder, then, if his soul reflects its moods? His mind changes with the sea—grave in the storm; in sunshine and calm full of unfettered glee. He is a child of the sea, thoughtlessly gay like the playful wavelet, but sometimes dark as the foaming tempest. One feeling chases another from his childlike mind as rapidly as, when the storm has died down, the billows sink to rest, and the very memory of it has passed away.

The good things of life are very unequally divided in this world. To some existence is so easy that they need only plant a bread-fruit tree in their youth, and their whole life is provided for. Others, again, seem to be denied everything except the strength to battle for life; they must laboriously wring from hostile Nature every mouthful of their sustenance. They are sent forth to the outposts, these people; they form the wings of the great army of humanity in its constant struggle for the subjugation of nature.

Such a people are the Eskimos, and among the most remarkable in existence. They are a living proof of the rare faculty of the human being for adapting himself to circumstances and spreading over the face of the earth.

The Eskimo forms the extreme outpost towards the infinite stillness of the regions of ice, and as far,

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almost, as we have forced our way to the northward, we find traces left behind them by this hardy race.

The tracts which all others despise he has made his own. By dint of constant struggle and slow development, he learnt some things that none have learnt better. Where for others the conditions which make life possible came to an end, there life began for him. He has come to love these regions; they are to him a world in which he himself embodies the whole of the human race.¹ Outside their limits he could not exist.

It is to this people that the following pages are devoted.

The mutual resemblance of the different tribes of Eskimos is no less striking than their difference from all other races in features, figure, implements and weapons, and general manner of life.

A pure-bred Eskimo from Bering Straits is so like a Greenlander that one cannot for a moment doubt that they belong to the same race. Their language, too, is so far alike that an Alaska Eskimo and a Greenlander would probably, after some little time, be able to converse without much difficulty.

¹ The Eskimos call themselves *inuit*—that is to say, ‘human beings’; all other men they conceive as belonging to a different genus of animals.

Captain Adrian Jacobsen, who has travelled both in Greenland and in Alaska, told me that in Alaska he could manage to get along with the few words of Eskimo he had learnt in Greenland. These two peoples are divided by a distance of about 3,000 miles—something like the distance between London and Afghanistan. Such unity of speech among races so widely separated is probably unique in the history of mankind.

The likeness between all the different tribes of Eskimos, as well as their secluded position with respect to other peoples, and the perfection of their implements, might be taken to indicate that they are of a very old race, in which everything has stiffened into definite forms, which can now be but slowly altered. Other indications, however, seem to conflict with such a hypothesis, and render it more probable that the race was originally a small one, which did not until a comparatively late period develop to the point at which we now find it, and spread over the countries which it at present inhabits.

If it should seem difficult to understand, at first sight, how they could have spread in a comparatively short time over these wide tracts of country without moving in great masses, as in the case of larger migrations, we need only reflect that their present inhospitable abiding-places can scarcely have been

inhabited, at any rate permanently, before they took possession of them, and that therefore they had nothing to contend with except nature itself.

The region now inhabited by the Eskimos stretches from the west coast of Bering Straits over Alaska, the north coast of North America, the North American groups of Arctic Islands, the west coast, and, finally, the east coast, of Greenland.

By reason of his absolutely secluded position, the Eskimo has given the anthropologists much trouble, and the most contradictory opinions have been advanced with reference to his origin.

Dr. H. Rink, who has made Greenland and its people the study of his life, and is beyond comparison the greatest authority on the subject, holds that the Eskimo implements and weapons—at any rate, for the greater part—may be traced to America. He regards it as probable that the Eskimos were once a race dwelling in the interior of Alaska, where there are still a considerable number of inland Eskimos, and that they have migrated thence to the coasts of the ice-sea. He further maintains that their speech is most closely connected with the primitive dialects of America, and that their legends and customs recall those of the Indians.

One point among others, however, in which the Eskimos differ from the Indians is the use of dog-

sledges. With the exception of the Incas of Peru, who used the llama as a beast of burden, no American aborigines employed animals either for drawing or for carrying. In this, then, the Eskimos more resemble the races of the Asiatic polar regions.

But it would lead us too far afield if we were to follow up this difficult scientific question, on which the evidence is as yet by no means thoroughly sifted. So much alone can we declare with any assurance, that the Eskimos dwelt in comparatively recent times on the coasts around Bering Straits and Bering Sea—probably on the American side—and have thence, stage by stage, spread eastward over Arctic America to Greenland.

It is in my judgment impossible to determine at what time they reached Greenland and permanently settled there. From what has already been said it appears probable that the period was comparatively late, but it does not seem to me established, as has been asserted in several quarters, that we can conclude from the Icelandic sagas that they first made their appearance on the west coast of Greenland in the fourteenth century. It certainly appears as though the Norwegian colonies of Österbygd and Vesterbygd (*i.e.* Easter- and Wester-district or settlement) were not until that period exposed to serious attacks on the part of the 'Skrellings' or